

Will the Dual Crises of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Climate Change be Portals to Widening Opportunity or Will the Doors Close Even Tighter? Strategies for a Transition to a More Equitable, Resilient, and Ecologically Sustainable US Higher Education System

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In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic Award-winning author, Arundhati Roy in April of 2020 released a video of a selection from her forthcoming book.¹²⁷ She states:

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

She goes on to say that a return to “normal” in/after this pandemic would in many ways be the worst thing that could happen to our society. Others have echoed her insight, that we cannot return to “normal,” including a group of C40 mayors of some of the world’s largest cities and another group of award winning artists, activists and noble prize winning scientists.¹²⁸ Nearly 40 mayors representing more than 700 million people in cities across the globe have issued a joint 9 point statement calling for a transformative recovery from the Covid-19 crisis that fundamentally alters global economic and energy systems, warning that a mere return to “business as usual” means accepting a world barreling toward climate catastrophe and with gross inequality.¹²⁹

Covid-19 has laid bare the systemic inequities too often found at the heart of our communities—and as we start to emerge from this crisis, we must rebuild an economy that truly works for everyone,” Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, chair of C40 Cities.

Another letter/statement cosigned by 200 of the world’s award-winning and noble laureate artists, activists and scientists, was co-drafted by actress, Juliette Binoche and astrophysicist Aurélien Barrau. It calls for a “radical transformation” in how the “world works” in order to address the oncoming climate crisis and inequality. The letter recognizes that the problem is systematic and “adjustments are not enough” and demands that the planet’s leaders not attempt to “go back to normal” after the coronavirus pandemic passes, calling for substantive and swift action to address the climate crisis, consumerism, and economic inequality in the wake of the crisis.

“The ongoing ecological catastrophe is a meta-crisis: the massive extinction of life on Earth is no longer in doubt, and all indicators point to a direct existential threat. Unlike a pandemic, however severe, a global ecological collapse will have immeasurable consequences”¹³⁰

Noam Chomsky the linguist and dissident social thinker from MIT speaks of the need to make public policy decisions as well as our own personal decisions¹³¹ based upon the likely outcomes that we know will ensue

¹²⁷ Arundhati Roy (forthcoming September 2020) *Azadi: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction*. Haymarket, Video excerpt link retrieved April 2020 <https://youtu.be/7hgQFaeaeo0>.

¹²⁸ <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/05/07/return-business-usual-means-climate-catastrophe-worlds-mayors-demand-transformative>; <https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/05/07/problem-systemic-over-200-artists-and-scientists-dare-world-envision-different-post>.

¹²⁹ https://www.c40.org/press_releases/taskforce-principles#principles

¹³⁰ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/05/06/please-let-s-not-go-back-to-normal_6038793_3232.html

¹³¹ Noam Chomsky: (April 29, 2020). Interview by C.J. Polychroniou., COVID-19 Interview, TRUTHOUT.

from our decisions. Considering the horror of the Nazi actions in the mid-20th century, Hannah Arendt speaks of the “banality of evil” stemming from abdicating our responsibility to think about the consequences of our daily actions. She states:

*“The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil...This inability to think created the possibility for many ordinary men to commit evil deeds on a gigantic scale, the like of which had never been seen before. The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge but the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. **And I hope that thinking gives people the strength to prevent catastrophes in these rare moments when the chips are down.**” Hannah Arendt.¹³²*

While uncertainty remains, we do have the gift of the *ability to think*, and we live in a data rich era in which science, using remote and direct sensing tools, has measured and modeled the unescapable facts concerning the outcomes of various human activity decisions on environmental systems such as the earth’s climate. We also know the socioeconomic differences represented by U.S. zip codes and race/ethnicities can predict differences in average life expectancy or the likelihood of deaths from pandemics such as COVID-19.¹³³



Within higher education, the statistics we track in the Indicators series, reveal to us certain patterns and trends. For example, we know from Census Data that only about 12 percent of the bachelor’s degrees awarded in any given year will go to those who are from the lowest family income quartile (Indicator 5 series). We also know from NCES’s *Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal (BPS)* studies over several rounds that low-income and first-generation entering college students have about a 21 percent chance of completing a bachelor’s degree in 6 years, compared with a 66 percent chance for students who are not low-income and first-generation college. (Indicator 5 series).¹³⁴ This outcome reflects the fact that the average *Unmet Need* for students in the lowest family income quartile was 94 percent of the average family income for these students (Indicator 3 series).¹³⁵ Given these conditions, it is not surprising that low-income students have low completions rates.

As I write this essay, in mid-May 2020, in the United States, we have over 80,000 persons dead in under 8 weeks from COVID-19. As the social thinkers, artists, scientists and large city mayors strongly put it to us, we have had for some time solid scientific consensus predictions of massive existential harm to come if we do not quickly address the climate change crisis. Do we have the right to ignore these public health, climate, and higher education equity facts as we seek ways to recover, adapt and rebuild our lives in the face of COVID-19? Just

¹³² Hannah Arendt *“The Life of the Mind”*. Book by Hannah Arendt. Chapter: “Thinking”, 1978.

¹³³ In California, Latinos represent 70% of all coronavirus related deaths within the demographic of those 18 to 49-years-old, despite making up just 43% of the population, according to data from the California Department of Public Health. “That’s the occupational side of this—a disproportionate number of black and brown communities are not teleworking or not home working. They’re right on the front lines,” said California Gov. Gavin Newsom, during one of his daily coronavirus updates. In New York City, Hispanics are dying at rates more than 50% higher than their white counterparts, and more than twice the rate of Asians, according to the New York City Health Department.

¹³⁴ Cahalan, Margaret W., Perna, Laura W., Addison, Marisha, Murray Chelsea, Patel, Pooja R., & Jiang, Nathan. (2020) *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2020 Historical Trend Report*. Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennAHEAD). Indicator 5 series. This report citation is referred to subsequently in this essay as *Equity Indicators Report:2020*. <http://pellinstitute.org/>.

¹³⁵ Unmet Need is the financial need remaining after the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) and all grants and other discounts (but not loans) are subtracted from the cost of attendance (COA).

how much of this information can we ignore or put aside to address later, as we look to our own institutional and personal needs?

As the social thinkers communicate to us from the past and present, we are **indeed not justified** in ignoring this information that our science has produced. As we recover and rebuild, we are seriously negligent if we do not work harder to understand the infrastructure and underlying interrelationships that have led us to this juncture. In higher education, as in other areas, we need to develop bold action plans that do not allow us to return to our normalcy without addressing underlying issues. I hope that what has been identified by systems thinkers as an “empathetic inquiry”¹³⁶ will lead to an awareness that everyone benefits from the development of a more egalitarian, ecologically sustainable, inclusive, and diverse higher educational system.



A Question of Will—Not a Lack of Talent, Technology, or Resources. Largely due to the contributions of the enterprise we call “higher education” across the globe, we actually do have the informational data, technology, and resources to tackle and solve these issues.¹³⁷ If we can muster the will and courage to do it, we can rebuild a U.S. higher education that is more just, and transitions us into the existential imperative of a new green economy. In the introduction to this 2020 and previous Indicators reports we quote a speech by Martin Luther King entitled *Where Do We Go from Here?* Dr. King argued that: “*There is no deficit in human resources, the deficit is in human will.*”¹³⁸

Along these lines we note that many private and public higher education institutions are increasingly funded not by disinterested money for the common good, but by the very interests that are currently blocking progress on public health, equity, food security, and climate and environmental justice for all citizens. Many aspects of the higher education system in the US, if looked at critically, seem designed to maintain and foster the very inequalities that must be addressed if we are to move forward justly. Maybe the COVID-19 crisis is sending a message to higher education leaders that it is time to break these ties and have the strength to use our gift of thinking, as Hannah Arendt said: “**to prevent catastrophes in these rare moments when the chips are down.**”

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I believe that if we can seize this slightly open portal, we can rebuild a more equitable, resilient, and environmentally sustainable higher education system. This will be a system that is strong precisely because it is diverse and inclusive, and one that provides an opening wide for the winds of opportunity. It will be a system that excels at preparing our diverse population for contributory work that pays living wages, helps restore public health, combats the climate crisis, increases food security, reduces air and water pollution, and restores our urban areas, suburbs, agriculture lands and forests.

¹³⁶ Richmond, B. (1997, 2005) *Introduction to Systems Thinking*, STELLA isee systems, Inc. “Being able to empathize is a skill that can be developed—and is in some ways, the ultimate Systems Thinking skill. . .The key to evolving our education system lies in tapping the potential synergies that exist in the mutually reinforcing processes of thinking, communicating and learning.” Retrieved from: <https://www.fi.muni.cz/~xpelane/IV109/jaro07/IST.pdf>.

¹³⁷ In the case of climate, there are two exceptionally useful efforts that focus on solutions to climate. Drawdown <https://www.drawdown.org/> and <https://www.climateinteractive.org>.

¹³⁸ Especially in the final years of his life Dr. King increasingly spoke of the interrelationships between civil rights and education, the economic system, poverty, militarism, and racism. <https://kairoscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/King-quotes-2-page.pdf>.

An international friend of mine characterized COVID-19 as the “universe’s way of revealing to us and telling us about underlying issues that we have put off addressing far too long that we must now face.” Below are my

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thoughts and “reimagining” about what I think needs to happen. I also issue a challenge to those who are reading this essay to reimagine for themselves what changes they think need to happen.

Underlying Concerns That Must Be Addressed

1. Higher Education As Basic Human Right as a Starting Point. Within the U.S. we need to start by acknowledging that, as the U.N. Declaration on Social and Cultural Rights affirms, higher education, is a universal human right¹³⁹ and not an “investment commodity” to be bought and sold.¹⁴⁰ This is the right of every person to an education that develops their talents and equips them to be full contributory participants in their period of history. In the U.S. in the 21st century information age, this increasingly means a policy imperative to move away from viewing the right to education as stopping at 12th grade.

2. Taking a Systems Approach and Equalization of Institutional Resources and Quality. To address our pressing concerns, we must take a less competitive and more systems-thinking approach. Each higher education institution whether public, private non-profit or private for profit is part of a wider interrelated eco-system, in which many interrelated components are needed to function. Equalization of institutional resources and quality does not mean a reduction in diversity or excellence, but it does mean embedding the consideration of equity issues in every step of institutional recovery and rebuilding. The current U.S. higher education system is characterized as having a notable degree of institutional stratification and homogenization of student enrollment by socio-economic status (SES), and the SES proxy measures of ACT and SAT scores measuring academic preparedness. Correspondingly there is a high degree of focus on college rankings and unequal levels of resources among institutions. To the extent that students measure their own self-worth with the ranking of the institutions to which they gain admittance and attend there is also an additional source of inequality. A contrasting system would be Norway.¹⁴¹ Compared with many other higher education systems, the Norwegian system can be considered to have a relatively low degree of hierarchy, with institutions intentionally designed to be “equal in terms of prestige and quality.” There needs to be a conscious overt policy to promote more equalization. This must also involve a reform policy that gifts made by private donors need to be disinterested and not result in whole departments being under the thumb of the corporate interests.

Equalization of institutional resources and quality does not mean a reduction in diversity or excellence, but it does mean embedding the consideration of equity issues in every step of institutional recovery and rebuilding.

3. Transition from Competitive Merit Based Admissions to Inclusive Mastery Requirements. There must also be a retreat from harmful so called “merit based” competitive ranking of students in high school to determine

¹³⁹ Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights of the United Nations declares: “Higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.” This covenant has been ratified by over 166 nations not including the United States, who has never ratified this U.N. Covenant.

¹⁴⁰ Cahalan M Franklin K, and Yamashita M, (2016). Is Higher Education a Human Right or a Competitive Investment Commodity? (.pdf)

¹⁴¹ Higher Education Funding Council for England (2013). *International Research on the Effectiveness of Widening Participation*. London, England: Author. Retrieved from https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/*/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/.

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college admissions. As we have seen in the Indicator 2 series of this report, there is a consistent inverse relationship between the percent of low-income students and the selectivity of the institution. Generally speaking there is also a strong correlation between the selectivity of the institution and its national rankings and ratings; indeed entering student scores are a major component of how institutions are ranked. This form of admissions does not serve the public good and is not consistent with an equal right to education. Moreover the merit admission system fundamentally destroys the ideal of a university as a center for innovative, collaborative learning and thinking. Ecologically we know that monocultures are weak and that a diversity of many attributes is needed for a healthy ecosystem. This is also true for a higher education eco-system. In a complex society many different talents are needed, not just those apparent on standardized tests, or high school grades, resumes, and essays used to judge the “merit” of applicants. The evidence is growing that this overly competitive

environment, morally justified only because it is asserted that it will lead to more learning or excellence, is harmful both to the winners and losers in the game. It is also destructive to the positive learning that higher education has a mission to ensure.

The Introduction to each of the Indicators reports has cited the important work of the Equality Trust epidemiologists, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett. Their research found that rates of eleven different health and social problems: physical health, mental health, drug abuse, education attainment, imprisonment, obesity, social mobility, trust and community life, violence, teenage pregnancies, and child well-being were higher among developed countries having more inequality among both poor and rich and that these indicators were more related to inequality levels than the absolute income differences among developed countries.¹⁴² They conclude that there are: “pernicious effects that inequality has on societies: eroding trust, increasing anxiety and illness, (and) encouraging excessive consumption.” More directly, Lani Guinier (2016) argues in the *Tyranny of the Meritocracy, Democratizing Higher Education in America*, that: “The merit systems that dictate and justify the college admissions are functioning to select and privilege elite individuals” and exclude others rather than “creating learning communities geared to advance democratic societies.”¹⁴³ With a focus on England, Lee Elliot Major and Stephan Manchin advocate a lottery admissions system for students meeting transparent entrance requirements.¹⁴⁴

4. Setting Place Based Achievable Targets and Providing the Means to Attain the Goals (National, State, Local, and Individual Levels)—At the individual level, research by ACT has demonstrated that having “specific career goals” is even more linked to academic success in college than test scores or prior academic performance.¹⁴⁵ On the national and state levels, in 2009 President Obama challenged the country to set goals that by 2020 would result in the U.S. once again being number 1 in bachelor’s degree attainment.¹⁴⁶ In many cities

¹⁴² Wilkinson, R.G and Pickett, K.E (2009), *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (2009) Allen Lane. Pickett, K.E. & Wilkinson, R.G. (2015). Income Inequality and Health: A Causal Review. *Social Science & Medicine*, 128, 316-326.

¹⁴³ Lani Guinier (2016) *Tyranny of the Meritocracy, Democratizing Higher Education in America*, ????

¹⁴⁴ Major, L.E., & Manchin, S. (2018). *Social Mobility: And Its Enemies*. Pelican Books. Their views are summarized in a short blog: Why we should select students by lottery; <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/why-we-should-select-students-by-lottery/>

¹⁴⁵ ACT and Council for Opportunity in Education. (2015). *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2014*. Iowa City: ACT Inc.

¹⁴⁶ President Obama, Address to a Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009.

and states this call was heeded with new initiatives to increase college enrollment and completion.¹⁴⁷ A decade later, we know that as a nation, we have not reached this goal. Instead as shown in the Indicator 6 series in this report, the U.S., second in the OECD charts in 2000, and 12th in 2009, was 18th in 2018 in the OECD tracking.¹⁴⁸

Action Plans to Address the Widening Gap Between the 50 U.S. States in College Attainment. To have achieved Obama’s 2020 goal, the U.S. would need to have had about 56 percent of the population aged 25 to 34 having a bachelor’s degree (the highest-ranking country in the OECD listing in 2018 was Lithuania with 56 percent (see Equity Indicator 6 series). Of our U.S. states by 2018—only Massachusetts attained a rate over 50 percent (53 percent). Moreover, as shown in Equity Indicator 5, disturbingly, there is a widening gap among the U.S. states with the lowest states in 2018 having only 23 percent attainment among the 25 to 34-year-olds. In the U.S. we have seen a corresponding widening of political and economic divides among the states. State differences have long roots and are complex, but we need to study the reasons for these gaps and intentionally develop ambitious programs to equalize education attainment across the 50 US states.

Learning from Examples of Countries That Have Notably Increased Participation. International comparisons are not always what they seem, but two examples can be cited of countries that have articulated ambitious college attainment goals and seemingly reached these goals or are on track to reaching them. One example is the Netherlands. Since the mid-2000s, the Netherlands has had an articulated goal that by 2020, 50 percent of the 25 -34-year-old workforce would have a higher education degree. It was argued that to reach the nation’s goal to become “a top-five leading knowledge economy,” the Netherlands needed to seriously invest to increase higher education participation, particularly by non-traditional underrepresented student groups, such as mature students, part-time students, associate degree students, professional master’s students and ethnic minority students.¹⁴⁹ Correspondingly to attain these goals, the Netherlands initiated a generous system of support for students consisting of low tuition, and grants and loans for living expenses. If students completed their degrees within 15 years, they did not have to repay the amounts of the government support. A look at the OECD data reveals that the Netherlands went from 24 percent bachelor’s attainment of 25-34- year-olds in 2000 to 46 percent by 2018. Australia is another country that set concrete achievable goals. For example, the Australian government set formal aspirational goals of reaching 40 percent bachelor’s attainment of 25 to 34-year-olds by 2025.¹⁵⁰ By 2018 they had exceeded this goal going from 24 percent in 2000 to 41 percent in 2018. Australia also has a formal “proportional representational equity goal” of having 20 percent of enrolled students come from the lowest income quartile by 2020.

Perhaps the lesson from these statistics and examples is the importance of setting goals not “to be first in the world”, but to set goals that are specific to the local setting combined with the specific means to attain the goals. In 2000, the U.S. had a national attainment rate of 30 percent, at that time second among the OECD countries. By 2018 the U.S. had increased up to 39 percent and was just at the OECD average.¹⁵¹ More ambitious goals cannot be reached in the U.S. unless rates of completion are increased for all groups, but especially those in the bottom

147 An example of which is illustrated by the 55 Thousand Degrees initiative in Louisville Kentucky—a community project that yearly tracks college going in the *Greater Louisville’s Education Scorecard 2014 Update*, 55 Thousand Degrees, http://www.55000degrees.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/55K_PR14_WhitePaper_Web.pdf.

148 President Obama, Address to a Joint Session of Congress, February 24, 2009.

149 J.J. (Hans) Vossensteyn, Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, *Widening Participation in Higher Education in the Netherlands* Report submitted to HEFCE and OFFA October 2013 http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/wpinternationalresearch/2013_WPeffectivenessNeth.pdf.

150 Trevor Gale and Stephen Parker, Deakin University, *Australia Widening Participation in Australian Higher Education Report submitted to HEFCE and OFFA* October 2013 http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/indirreports/2013/wpinternationalresearch/2013_WPeffectivenessAus.pdf.

151 See Indicator 6a in the 2020 report.

half of the income distribution and among those U.S. states in the bottom half of the state distribution. It's clear that many U.S. states will need more help than others to reach goals reflecting full participation in a knowledge economy. It is also inescapable not to notice from the international statistics on educational attainment in Indicator 6 that the countries that have made the most advances in educating their population are ones that are relatively less burdened than the U.S. since World War II in military spending and the production of weapons or dependent on the sale of weapons to other countries keep their economies going. As seen in Appendix A to this report, annual military spending in the US is about 26 times (\$738 billion vs. \$28 billion) the amount spent on Pell Grants serving over 7 million students annually.¹⁵²

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In the next section, we discuss some specific strategies that we believe will help in achieving our goal of transitioning to a more equitable, resilient and environmentally sustainable higher education system.

Key Transition Strategies

5. Transitioning to Debt-Free College for All. The COVID-19 pandemic reveals the need to revisit our goal setting with a realistic systems-based approach that provides not just the goals but the means to attain them. Without real change in the levels of federal grant support relative to college-cost, we cannot hope for significant progress in college completion rates. The evidence from the U.S. high school longitudinal studies is that U.S.

The evidence from the U.S. high school longitudinal studies is that U.S. students from all social groups have for some time had high aspirations for postsecondary education. For example, already by 2002, at the start of the 21st century over 80 percent of high school students aspired to attain a bachelor's degree or higher. Our students have bachelor's completion goals but for most low-income students there are just too many strong barriers to achieve these goals.

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Support Pell Grant Restoration. The period since 1980's there has been a steady decline in the financial support provided to low-income students in the United States. These ever-increasing cost barriers lead some to conclude that the system is intentionally set up to reduce completion rates among low-income students. When Pell Grants were first legislated, they were discussed as intended to cover three-fourths of the cost of postsecondary education. This goal was never reached but in the late 1970s maximum Pell grants did cover two-thirds of the average cost of attendance.¹⁵⁴ Since 1980, the maximum Pell Grant has fallen and covered only 25 percent of college costs in 2018. Average college costs for all institutions, weighted by full-time undergraduate enrollment, were 2.5 times higher (in constant 2018 dollars) in 2017-18 than in 1974-75. To restore Pell to its 1970's proportion of college costs would require a Pell maximum of about \$16,484 rather than the maximum of the \$6,195 of 2019-20.

¹⁵² Equity Indicators Report: 2020, Appendix A, Figure A-6

¹⁵³ Cahalan, M, Ingles, S, Burns, L, Planty, M., (2006), *United States High School Sophomores: A Twenty-Two Year Comparison, 1980–2002*, Statistical Analysis Report, U.S. Department of Education, NCES 2006–327 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006327.pdf>.

¹⁵⁴ Mensel, F. (2013). Birth of the Pell Grant: The Community College Role. *In Reflections on Pell: Championing Social Justice through 40 Years of Education Opportunity*. Washington, D.C.: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Education.

Covering Full-Cost of Attendance -Imperative to Pass Some Version of State-Federal Partnerships for Debt Free College.

In 2019, legislation entitled the Debt Free College Act of 2019, which was introduced in the U.S. Senate by Senator Brian Schatz of Hawaii.¹⁵⁵ The bill proposes to establish a federal-state grant partnership program that would require state public institutions to provide students with the full estimated “cost of attendance,” including books, transportation, room and board and living expenses. The bill requires state public institutions to tie institutional charges increases to the consumer price index; and provides additional support for minority-serving institutions. This act or an equivalent act that builds upon the existing systems in place needs to happen and happen quickly.

Leveraging our Progressive IRS Tax System to Implement Forgiveness Plans for the Student Loan Crisis.¹⁵⁶

COVID-19 has resulted in a temporary suspension of student debt payments, but clearly there is a need to address the underlying failure and unfairness of using student loans to finance higher education. According to Forbes, by the end of 2019, total student loan debt was \$1.56 trillion and the total U.S. borrowers with student debt was 44.7 million. The default rate was 11.4 percent (90 days delinquent). The total amount of money in default (360+ days delinquent) was \$101 billion from 5.1 million borrowers. Much has been written about the negative impacts on the lives of former students after college and we know low-income and minority students are more likely to have debt and higher debt and to be impacted disproportionately.¹⁵⁷ The system is overly complex in addition to being unfair. It is clear we cannot address the needs of future generations of students to have debt free college without a debt forgiveness pathway for those who are already struggling with life choices impacted by the yoke of this debt. As countries such as Australia have shown, using a progressive tax system is one way to manage student debt in a simpler and more egalitarian manner that avoids the serious issues of default. Providing the program is progressive and provides forgiveness plans based on income and wealth, the IRS system provides a feasible way to fairly work toward debt forgiveness for student loans.

6. Imperative to Increase the Reach and Resources for College Access and Success Support Programs.

Recognizing that financial aid was not enough to foster a more equitable education system, the Higher Education Act of 1965, included provisions from the beginning for services that would eventually become known as TRIO. These services become especially important in times such as are being faced in the Spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. TRIO programs address the holistic needs of low-income, first-generation students, and students with disabilities. As such they play an essential role in mitigating against the barriers often faced by low-income students such as low self-esteem, academic unpreparedness, and lack of basic needs. TRIO fosters greater inclusivity, positive identity, empowerment, leadership, academic excellence, emergency aid, and engagement of the students they serve. Despite the mounting evidence from rigorous evaluation studies that *TRIO Works* and can increase access and completion rates as much as 40 to 50 percent, TRIO services, like Pell Grants remain greatly under-funded. At current funding levels annually TRIO services reach less than 2 percent of eligible students with intensive programs, and about 5 percent with light touch programs. Using data from an NCES nationally representative sample of US high school

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¹⁵⁵ The Debt Free College Act of 2019 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/672/text>.

¹⁵⁶ www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2019/02/25/student-loan-debt-statistics-2019

¹⁵⁷ Equity Indicators Report:2020 (Indicator 4 series)

students in the 1990s, Horn and Chen found in correlational analysis that participation in any type of pre-college program doubled the odds for enrolment in a 4-year college after controlling for other factors known to be related to college entrance.¹⁵⁸ The random assignment evaluation of Upward Bound (UB) high school program found that participation in UB, the most intensive of the Federal pre-college programs, resulted in a 50 percent higher BA attainment rate in 6 years among low income and first generation students who were randomly assigned in middle school or early high school to Upward Bound and who entered the program.¹⁵⁹ The TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) program provides academic tutoring, peer mentoring, counseling, and other supports to low-income, first-generation students already enrolled in college. Reports on SSS published by the US Department of Education in 2015 and 2019 have found substantial and significant impacts on completion from SSS participation.¹⁶⁰ For example, the 2015 report found that three years after entering 2-year institutions as freshmen, 41 percent of SSS participants earned a certificate or associate's degree or transferred to a 4-year institution as compared with just 21 percent of a national sample of similarly situated students. The SSS completion rate was 50 percent by the end of the fourth year as compared with 28 percent of the national sample. SSS currently serves about 200,000 students per year and the seven-college access and completion TRIO programs (UB, SSS, TS, EOC, UBMS, VUB, and McNair) taken together serve almost 800,000 students per year. Programs like TRIO are even more critically needed in these times of crisis. In times of COVID-19 emergency, the TRIO infrastructure for serving low-income and first generation students should be fully utilized to increase the number served and ensure that the impact of COVID-19 is mitigated for cohorts of entering students, students in the midst of their college experience, graduating seniors, and adults returning to education in times of unemployment. The TRIO EOC program especially needs to be fully supported in anticipation of the entering of unemployed workers to college to transition to new work opportunities. The Council for Opportunity in Education (COE)'s plan for emergency funding to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis for students can be accessed at the address in the footnote below.¹⁶¹

7. Suspending and Rethinking the Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Pell Grant Requirements. In the light of the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic on student progression, as well considering the results of repeated studies that conclude that the SAP requirements are not working as intended, current SAP requirements should be suspended and not re-instated. Pell Grants have always had performance requirements meant to require federal aid recipients meet certain institution requirements for academic progress in order to continue to receive aid. For many years this was defined as being in “good standing” at the institution, and time requirements were implemented by limits on the number of semesters a student could receive funding. In an effort, supposedly to encourage students to progress more quickly, and to use scarce Pell resources more “efficiently” the recent decades have seen the imposition of much more stringent and confusing requirements. Not only do students have to have a certain GPA, but they must show on an annual basis that they have successfully completed a high percentage of the courses they attempt (withdrawals count as not-completing) and also that they are on track to graduate from their program within 150 percent of the time ordinarily required. These requirements, combined with the lack of Pell grant coverage of college costs, has led to another a serious barrier for low-income students

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- 158** Horn, L. and Chen, X., (1998), *Toward Resiliency: At Risk Students Who Make It to College*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Washington D.C.
- 159** Cahalan M, *Addressing Study Error in the Random Assignment National Evaluation of Upward Bound: Do the Conclusions Change?*; http://www.pellinstitute.org/publications-Do_the_Conclusions_Change_2009.shtml.
- 160** Kristina L. Zeiser, Tsze Chan, Ruth Heuer, Melissa Cominole (2015) *Persistence and Completion in Postsecondary Education of Participants in the TRIO Student Support Services Program*, Student Service Office of Postsecondary Education, US Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/sss-heoa-report-2015.pdf>. Kristina L. Zeiser, Ruth Heuer, Melissa Cominole, (2019) *Comparing Student Outcomes Between Student Support Services Participants and Nonparticipants in the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study May 2019* Prepared for: Student Service Office of Postsecondary Education U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oep/trio/sssparticipantsinbpls.pdf>.
- 161** See this Site for an update on COE's proposals in the light of the COVID-19 emergency www.bit.ly/TRIOCOVIDP4

who must juggle working long hours against these requirements. The Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE) at Columbia University Teachers College has conducted several studies of the SAP requirements.¹⁶² Their rigorous research using regression discontinuity and differences of differences methods found that high percentages of Pell recipients—approximately 40 percent of first-term recipients—were at risk of losing aid due to SAP failure. They also found that most students despite programs to inform them of the requirements did not understand that they would lose their aid until it was too late. There was little evidence that SAP resulted in higher academic performance or program completion. They conclude:

“A key implication of our research is that the primary effect of SAP policy appears to be punitive—simply limiting students’ access to aid—rather than formative.... The discouragement effects of the policy mean that some students who could have earned a degree are dissuaded from reenrolling.”

These results suggest that especially in these times of COVID-19 that these punitive requirements should be permanently suspended and rethought. Programs like “Binding Study Advice” (BSA) such as exist in Netherlands and similar programs in South Africa that initiate requirements such as limits to work hours, and tutoring requirements to help students get back on track may be a better approach than the U.S. regulation of removal of the Pell Grant for lack of progress.

8. Five Year Pandemic and Green Transition Grants for Those Institutions and Groups Most Impacted. In responding to the dual crises of COVID-19 pandemic and of the Climate/Environmental crisis there is a need for a series of transition grants to help all parts of the higher education system, but especially those institutions and groups that are most vulnerable become more resilient.

Cost Equalization Between Public and Private Institutions. While 78 percent of college enrollment in 2018 was at public institutions, because private colleges on average are smaller than public colleges, about 60 percent of our postsecondary institutions are private (38 percent private non-profit and 23 percent private for-profit).¹⁶³ We know that many of these colleges reported being in serious financial trouble, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. While all institutions will be impacted by COVID-19, except for a small percentage of elite private institutions, we know that most private colleges and the students they serve will be severely impacted by COVID-19.

Currently the average net price for students (price after all grants and discounts but not loans are considered) at a 4-year private non-profit college is two times higher than 4-year public costs (\$26,840 vs.\$13,760) (Appendix Figure A-11). In hard times, many students will simply choose the public option. The ideal of “going” away to live in a dormitory at a small private college across the country may lose some of its appeal. COVID-19 will also accelerate the already clear trend to on-line degrees and digital learning. This will leave many private colleges with expensive under used facilities to maintain. We know that many of those institutions in danger of not surviving are those that have inspiring records of serving minority students and students with less entering resources in terms of academic scores and for whom the local private college is a real opportunity for mobility. The sense of community, inclusion and identity provided by these small private colleges is important to preserve. If we are not to see rapid private college closures, as we move to “free public college,” provision needs to be made to increase support so that that a higher portion of the cost of attendance can be covered for needy students at private as well as public institutions. This support should ensure institutions adopt innovative

162 Schudde, L., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2014). Pell grants as performance-based aid? An examination of satisfactory academic progress requirements in the nation’s largest need-based aid program (CAPSEE Working Papers). Judith Scott-Clayton & Lauren Schudde (2017). Performance Requirements in Need-Based Aid: What Roles Do They Serve, and Do They Work? CAPSEE website: <http://capseecenter.org/pell-grants-as-performance-based-aid/>

163 Over the last 50 years in the US about 75 percent of undergraduate students are enrolled at public colleges (78 percent in 2018), about 16 to 18 percent at private non-profit (17 percent in 2017), and from 5 to 10 percent at private for-profit institutions (5 percent in 2017).

learning strategies to ensure the success of the students admitted, and that more inclusive admission policies are developed by selective colleges. Private colleges would be helped by an increase in Pell Grant maximum to \$16,434, the amount needed to restore coverage to what it was before 1980 (about two-thirds of the average cost among all types of colleges).

Transition Grants for Private Colleges Re-Structuring. A look at the history of many private and public institutions shows that most have had transitions as one mode of organization is no longer sustainable and another is born. There is a need to transition private colleges institutional funding models and examine the options for institutions impacted by COVID-19. Several other countries have developed dual funding systems that support differing types of institutions based on enrollment and widening participation goals. These transition grants might include monies for repurposing facilities, faculty contracts, green and social distancing living designs and new industry partnerships for building green infrastructure. It might also include funding in some cases to become a public university or forming consortium's with other private colleges, building on or developing special strength niches within the enrollment market.

Transition Grants for Current and Returning Students Enrolled at Private Schools in Danger of Closure. These grants would be targeted on helping the students enrolled at marginal or closing institutions to be able to complete their degrees at the institution or through on-line programs.

9. Supporting a Green New Deal for Higher Education- Green Infrastructure Transition Grants. The broad concepts outlined in the Green New Deal include recognition of the interconnections of health care, free higher education, and job opportunities. Although opponents to the Green New Deal site higher education as the incubator of the movement toward “green socialism for sustainability,” and the source of the introduction of these ideas into Congress¹⁶⁴ thus far there has actually been very little federal support for sustainability initiatives in higher education.



Need for Well-Funded Concrete Federal Initiatives—Funding of the Federal Higher Education Sustainability Act (HESA) of 2019. In 2008, Congress did authorize the Higher Education Sustainability Act (HESA) provisions as part of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HR 4137) amendment signed by then President Obama. There is however, very little evidence that it remains funded. The bill contained provisions for Sustainability Summits to identify best practices in sustainability and a Sustainability Grant Program which authorized competitive grants to colleges and universities to establish sustainability research programs. More recently, in February of 2019 a new version of the legislation was introduced from U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), known as the Higher Education Sustainability Act of 2019. This act would create a competitive grant program that could award institutions of higher education \$200,000 to \$500,000 grants to establish sustainability programs for their campus and sustainability programs for students. As of this writing this legislation had not been passed but had been referred to committee.

Thus far sustainability initiatives in the U.S. higher education system have been much more linked to individual state efforts. It is fired mostly by the inescapable solid science research conducted in academia itself, and by such things the U.N. Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI).¹⁶⁵ Obviously there is a need for the U.S. federal government, in emergency COVID-19 recovery and higher education rebuilding to support emergency

¹⁶⁴ Rachele, Peterson, How Higher Education Birthed The Green New Deal And Eco-Socialism, The Federalist, <https://thefederalist.com/2019/02/20/higher> She writes: “The Green New Deal is the campus sustainability movement grown up and gone to Congress.”

¹⁶⁵ Examples are the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) that provides a platform for Higher Education Institutions to engage and contribute to the 2030 U.N. Sustainable Development Goals. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdinaction/hesi>. Another example is the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) which has developed a self-reporting tool (Stars) where colleges and The <https://stars.aashe.org/>.

sustainability provisions as soon as possible, and following that in the next full reauthorization of HEOA.

Generous GI Like Education Support Bill for Independent Students Wishing to Return to College to Train for Green Transition Employment Following the COVID-19 Loss of Employment.

As in other economic downturns we can expect there to eventually be increased enrollment of those seeking higher education when other opportunities to support themselves are blocked or pose health risks. It is imperative that we develop the underlying structures that will ensure that these entering or returning students get the financial grant aid, career counseling, and on-going support to complete their degrees/certificates. Many of these students are independent students with dependent children, the group with the most risk factors for non-completion (Indicators 1 and 5 series). We need a generous bold Green-GI-Like bill that provides grants not just for tuition costs but also living stipends so that independent students with and without families can pursue new careers. These are careers that both pay living wages and prepare them for sustainable forward- looking careers, that do not contribute to further environmental destruction.



There is an enormous amount to work that needs to be done, developing and implementing solutions to public health, environment, education, and basic needs such as food, transportation and energy. Recently published Oxford University research found that “green stimulus” spending on sustainable energy projects would be more effective than conventional stimulus measures in repairing the widespread economic damage done by the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁶⁶ Thanks to our gifts of thinking, and the hard work of academia throughout the world, we now do have the technology, data, and resources to address these issues. We Can Do It, if we can only have the will and work together!

166 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/05/green-stimulus-can-repair-global-economy-and-climate-study-says> The paper, is co-authored by the Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, and Lord Nicholas Stern, the climate economist, and catalogues more than 700 stimulus policies and makes comparisons with the global financial crisis of 2008. Oxford Review of Economic Policy, May 2020.